

Enhancing the Role of Traditional Leaders in African Governance



Donald Ray with Ghanaian President John Kufuor.
(Photo: D. Ray)

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In the mid-1970s, a young doctoral student named [Donald Ray](#) was studying rural settlement schemes in Zambia. "All of a sudden, one of the schemes ground to a halt when the local chief showed up and told them to stop. He controlled the land and had not been consulted." Several years later, while researching a book on Ghana, Dr Ray was struck by the power of chiefs in northern Ghana. During the December 31 revolution of 1981, which brought Jerry Rawlings to power, "I saw examples where the grassroots revolutionary cadres were unable to overcome resistance from the chiefs."

Building on these experiences, the University of Calgary Professor of Political Science is currently leading a novel research project on the role of African traditional leaders in local governance. Although often overlooked by international development organizations, chiefs and other traditional leaders still wield considerable power in many African countries — despite the rise of elected governments, bureaucracies, and other apparatus of the post-colonial state.

Involving chiefs

"If chiefs continue to have influence, and if there are still problems in carrying out development projects, one way of aiding the process of development could be to involve chiefs," argued Dr Ray during a presentation at the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). "But under what conditions can you involve chiefs? What is it about chiefs that might allow them to get involved in development and mobilize their people?"

With funding from IDRC, Dr Ray and his colleagues in three African countries — Ghana, Botswana, and South Africa — are analysing the role and contribution of traditional leaders in education and health reform, and the use of land as a social safety net of last resort. Based on this work, the team hopes to develop policy recommendations that enhance the responsiveness, effectiveness, and equity of selected social policies. Their results will be disseminated over the Internet via the [Traditional Authority Applied Research Network \(TAARN\)](#) Web site — which will soon feature a moderated discussion group called CHIEFSNET — and through printed publications.

Sources of legitimacy

In Africa, there are several kinds of chiefs and chieftancies, notes Dr Ray. In this study, the research team is focusing on traditional leaders whose offices predate the colonial period "because this gives them an important source of legitimacy among their people," he says. "Of course, things change over time. To be a chief in one of these countries is to have a referendum virtually every day on how you did. Support for a chieftancy can erode, or it can regain."

According to Dr Ray, the roots of legitimacy for African chiefs are partly pre-colonial historic, partly religious, and partly cultural. The contemporary state's roots, by contrast, include the legal system, the constitution, the nationalist struggle, and democratic elections. "When the post-colonial state attempts different types of development projects, it may leave chiefs out of the picture," he says. "We thought one of the ways to remedy this is to work out mechanisms, where appropriate, to combine legitimacies from both the state and traditional leaders, so there are more appeals to citizens to carry out development programs, whatever those might be."

Houses of Chiefs

Toward this end, the researchers are studying the institutional structures that exist for traditional leaders in each country. Under the Ghanaian and Botswana constitutions, chiefs may not serve as Members of Parliament or Cabinet Ministers out of concerns that they wield too much influence. (No such constitutional rule exists in South Africa.) However, Botswana has tribal administration offices, in which chiefs participate in certain aspects of local government and the judiciary. In Ghana, there is an elaborate system of Houses of Chiefs. This includes several hundred traditional councils, each of which elects members to one of ten Regional Houses of Chiefs, each of which sends five members to a National House of Chiefs. Its administrative staff is provided by the Government of Ghana, which also maintains a Chieftancy Division in the President's Office for liaison purposes.

In Ghana, the Houses of Chiefs have participated in delicate questions over land ownership. Foreign and domestic investors have complained that it's hard to obtain land titles. They have pressured the government to change the current system from one based on communal land tenure — involving ownership by a chief or the head of an extended family — to a form of private ownership. In response, "the government approached the National House of Chiefs to examine this issue. The National House of Chiefs concluded that for a variety of reasons, it would be too socially disruptive: it could result in the creation of a landless class," says Dr Ray. Virtually every Ghanaian has rights to some land. Without its customary land tenure system, Ghana may have faced an impossible situation when resettling 1,000,000 former citizens who were expelled from Nigeria in 1983.

Land issues

In South Africa, he continues, the land situation is "even more complicated" than in Ghana because of the land grab by the colonial and apartheid white-controlled governments and the white population from the indigenous population. "But there are still substantial parts of South Africa where land is under some type of customary land tenure," Dr Ray notes. "In those areas, there are questions over how the state and traditional authorities can work with each other to ensure that the maximum number of people have access to land."

Besides dealing with thorny land issues, some traditional leaders are advancing health promotion goals. In partnership with the United Nations, Ghana has developed a strategy to fight AIDS nationwide. Last summer, as part of this effort, several two-day workshops were held in the Asante region: one for King Osei Tutu II and the princes (paramount chiefs), two for the region's "Queen Mothers", and two for its divisional chiefs. "The Asante King was very frank in discussing the issues, said what has to be done, and declared that HIV-AIDS is the greatest threat to all Ghanaians. The idea now is to use the Asante chiefs and female traditional leaders to mobilize public opinion and change behaviours," says Dr Ray.

Community advocates

Chiefs often play a key role as community advocates, he stresses. "If you turn on the television in Ghana any night, much of the news is devoted to political leaders visiting chiefs during their travels. The chief uses this opportunity to express the hope that the government will build a road into the area, open a hospital, or upgrade the school," he explains. "Chiefs constantly act as spokespeople for the community. It's a way of articulating locally felt needs."

Dr Ray and his colleagues hope their research will encourage traditional leaders to forge closer ties both with each other and with their governments. Through the TAARN Web site, they also hope to stimulate discussion on traditional leadership issues among scholars, researchers, chiefs, political leaders, and students from around the world.

African model

"I hope that in the case of Canada, we can learn from Africa — especially this concept of a National Houses of Chiefs," Dr Ray concludes. "I would like to bring Canadian First Nations leaders together with the leaders and chiefs of Ghana, Botswana, and South Africa to explore how the African Houses of Chiefs operate, and whether similar institutions might be useful to the First Nations. It might be interesting to have a third House of Parliament in Canada — a House of First Nations — and maybe provincial equivalents. We hope to suggest this possibility. And then, of course, it's up to the First Nations to decide."

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